

**MINUTES OF THE DE BOARD MEETING**  
**Thursday 11 January 2024**  
**Conference Room, Rathgael House**

**Attendees:**

Mark Browne (Chair)  
Linsey Farrell  
Ronnie Armour  
Heather Cousins  
Andrew Scott  
Neil Palmer  
Marcella Phillips  
Paul Corrigan  
Philip Irwin (Item 3)

**Apologies:**

Faustina Graham

**In attendance:**

Bryan Laverty (Board Secretary)

**Observer:**

Stuart Downes - G7 Accountant – Budgeting Team

**Independent Review of Education**

Philip advised that the Review's final report was launched on 13 December 2023. The report consists of three volumes:

- Volume 1 is an overview. It describes the task, the priority areas for reform and key recommendations.
- Volume 2 provides greater detail. It describes the current strengths, weaknesses and modes of operation of the education system. It sets out the Panel's rationale for the recommended courses of action. Each chapter of Volume 2 contains a full suite of recommendations, including the key recommendations within Volume 1.
- Volume 3 includes a number of Appendices that provide further background information relevant to the Review.

Reaction to the report has been mixed and complicated and will be considered in the next steps which Philip outlined as follows:

- SMT has been asked to read the full report to ensure a full understanding of the rationale for the recommendations it contains;
- An internal consultation with SMT will be undertaken across January and February to discuss the recommendations, the rationale behind them, and to identify the feasibility and prioritisation for recommendations in light of resourcing;
- Discussions will also take place with key ALBs and DfE;

- The consultation will inform a paper and delivery plan to be submitted to Minister, if in place, by the end of April;
- The Department will need to consider the mechanisms for delivery. Some are already in place within the existing team and across DE. Others will involve other organisations. Buy in from an Executive will be vital and appropriate governance structure will be key.

Mark thanked Philip for his update. Mark identified five stages in taking forward the review:

- Clarify;
- Assess;
- Prioritise;
- Sequence; and
- Mobilise.

Mark advised that it will be for the Department to decide if recommendations should be taken forward with views from Ministers. Resourcing will be required to take this forward and prioritisation will be key to success. Nevertheless, this is a good opportunity to take forward a broad, but challenging agenda.

### **DE 2023/24 Business Plan (3rd quarter report)**

Andrew advised that of the 48 actions contained in the Business Plan 80% are on track to be achieved.

Andrew explained the purpose of the Performance Measures and updated the Board on progress. are designed to provide better information on progress and position on delivery. He advised that a Performance Measures Workshop is due to take place on 29 January to instil a better understanding of the concept of outcomes-focussed Performance Measures and how they can be used to measure progress at a Strategic Priority level.

Andrew advised that business plans for the Department's ALBs have been requested already. The EA's plan for 2023/24 has now been received, along with its plan draft plan for 2024/25.

The Board discussed areas of slippage including the impact of both the Capital Budget and ASOS on the quality of provision for children.

Grade 3s provided an update on their areas as follows:

Ronnie advised that consultation is to launch on the GTCNI Bill. Preparatory work for the new body is ongoing. The intention is that the new body will be in place by the end of the current Assembly mandate.

Mark emphasised the importance of curriculum, assessment, the environment in which children learn, and effective teaching and learning as fundamental pillars of the Department's work. While a number of these areas had not been progressed because of covid or lack of investment, DE needs to prioritise and refocus on these areas.

Mark requested that for future meetings a top page is provided with the Business Plan update drawing attention to the Board those areas where there are concerns, such as Strule and the Capital Budget.

## **Risk Management**

Andrew noted that there are increased scores for risks around Workforce and Capital. No new risks noted. The ALB Quality Assurance exercise confirmed that there are clear and up to date linkages between ALB RRs and DE's CRR.

The Board agreed that the risk status should be considered as follows:

- Consideration should be given to reducing the safeguarding risk from red;
- Risk 5, Workforce, should reflect ASOS and intention to strike and should be raised to red.

Risks around teacher professional learning should be considered within the context of existing risks.

## **Finance Director Report**

Neil reported that considering existing contingency the Department continues to forecast a significant Resource overspend this year of around £148m.

The Board discussed teaching workforce issues, and in particular possible pay settlements.

For 2024/25 DoF has undertaken an exercise, setting out processes for a flat cash budget for departments, but also asking departments for forecasts of the impact of reductions in budgets of 2% and 5%. DE has identified a £900m shortfall within the context of the exercise, £600m of which is pay related.

The Department received two Pre-Action Protocol letters in September 2023 from solicitors acting on behalf of RBAI and the Governors of Campbell College and subsequent notification of issue of formal proceedings of a Judicial Review relating to the classification of the schools as NDPBs. While the action is not proceeding against DE, there remains the possibility that a JR will be taken against DoF.

Neil provided an update on:

- Capital Budget.
- RAAC surveys.
- ALB and NI Teachers' Pension Scheme Accounts.

The Board noted that Finance Directorate is fielding a number of questions around the Education Information Solutions (EdIS) Programme as the contract is with Fujitsu.

## **Update from ARAC Meeting**

Paul advised that at its meeting on 19 December ARAC received presentations as follows:

EA representatives on Corporate Governance and Child Protection; and Suzanne Kingon on Strule, particularly Project 4.

ARAC also discussed updates on:

- NIAO Internal Audit
- Fraud/Whistleblowing
- Finance
- The Capita SIMS issue;
- Risk Management.

## **HR Report**

Marcella updated the Board on the HR Report provided in advance of the meeting.

Marcella reported the following on resourcing:

- Letters of Offer have/will be issued to successful applicants for vacancies at AO to DP level with start dates during January and February.
- A further phase of interviews for positions at EOII and EOI have been completed. It is anticipated that merit lists will be available during February. DE has raised demands for 5 EOII and 4 EOIs.
- It is anticipated that remaining candidates for SO and DP vacancies will be invited to interview early in the New Year.
- The deferment of recruitment competitions for G7 and G6 continues. This position is kept under review.
- It is anticipated that a new competition for AOs will launch during 2024.
- Work is continuing with the Departmental Business Services team to realign departmental structures/HRConnect hierarchy.
- Interviews for DP and SO Accountants are progressing. – DE has raised 3 demands.

Regarding Employee Relations Marcella advised:

- It is intended that a Centre of Excellence for sickness absence will be established, and work is underway in this regard.
- OHS will support the anticipated Centre of Excellence for sickness absence and recruitment campaigns are underway to ensure that OHS is resourced to do so.
- The latest NISRA sickness absence indicates that the main reason for absence within DE is Anxiety/Stress/Depression/other psychiatric illnesses.
- NICSHR is piloting a Health and Wellbeing Framework in DoF and DfC at present and will be rolled out across all departments. It is anticipated the DE will be the next department to complete the assessment tool.

- Formal advice issued across NICS in regard to strike on 18 January. Guidance and FAQs have also been issued.

### **Non Departmental Public Bodies**

Ronnie noted that a meeting with EA regarding the MEMR will take place soon.

Linsey advised that CCEA's Curriculum planning work is ongoing and that a strategic planning workshop with CCEA had been held at the beginning of December.